

Fantasy, Creativity and Proportions: Spiral Representations in Culture and Art

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Abstract

This paper seeks to establish a link between the referential process and the creative representation of the spiral as a symbol that derives from a fantasy plan common to different times and cultures. It is possible to find in different places of the world several archaeological references, from the Neolithic to Ancient Greece, from Brazil to Malta, etc., a common denominator that cannot be ignored. Its cultural expression can start from experiences in non-ordinary states of consciousness such as the shamanistic dimension of certain tribes, but can also be present in the popular and decorative expression of various non-industrial artefacts. In the artistic dimension, we will highlight some examples of contemporary artists who have been sensitive to this Spiral theme. Their inspiration was guided by images of the unconscious and by the golden ratio or certain visual harmonies that depart from mimetic references in nature. In any case, these works of art refer more to a natural and symbolic aesthetics than to the rational use attributed to them.

Keywords: Visionary Art, Spirals, Archaeology, Anthropology

1. Introduction

Among the various images resulting from non-ordinary states of consciousness that serve as an inspiration to the creative process of artists, the present paper singled out the spirals and studied some of the meanings that are usually attributed to these elements, as well as some transformations and adaptations they can undergo depending on the local culture.

Etymologically, the word 'spiral' springs from ancient roots inextricably bound up with ideas of creation, life-giving and aspiration – from the Latin *spiralis* or *spira*, and the Greek *speira*, meaning a spire or coil, or a conical or pyramidal structure, as well as from the Latin *spirare*, meaning 'to breathe', as in *expire* and *inspire*. (Ward, 2006, p. 17)

Symbols equivalent to spirals may appear in the form of serpents, spheres, tunnels, ladders, circles, mandalas, or labyrinths.

These symbols, apparently very different, keep between themselves a relationship of similarity and meanings. It is thus difficult to be clear about what is typical to one or the other. However, better than to look at this as a problem, it only reinforces the similarity these symbols represent.

Some examples of the presence of spirals will be discussed here, to highlight the strong influence that these images can have on creativity, imagination, and knowledge in the production of visual works.

Spirals are present all over nature, whether in plants, in vines and ferns, in animals, as in snails and

shells, in physical and atmospheric phenomena, such as hurricanes, cyclones, swirls, and in the formation of galaxies (Cirlot, 1984, p. 241). In general, all these spirals follow the golden ratio's proportion patterns. This proportion follows Fibonacci's numerical sequence, which is also found in the divisions of tree branches, in the arrangement of leaves or thorns, in the veins and arteries of animals, etc. These patterns are a structural base that is consistently present in the development and growth of the natural world. Thus, it is possible to understand the association of the spiral as a symbol of energy, of creation, also suggesting the idea of development. Therefore, more than a recurrent shape in the natural world, spirals seem to constitute an archetype of human thought and are often used to express these ideas and principles symbolically, through culture and art, confirmed by Jung's psychoanalytic theory. In his book, *The Archetypes and The Collective Unconscious*, he states that in paintings and drawings made by his patients, the contents depicted are often recurrent, which does not mean that the patients already knew that they were dealing with symbols. Jung said the following:

One can paint very complicated pictures without having the least idea of their real meaning. [...] It is interesting to observe how the execution of the picture frequently thwarts one's expectations in the most surprising way. (Jung, 1968, p. 352)

2. Archaeological References

Some examples of spirals in artistic remains from

prehistoric times and in various geographic locations will be analysed. The meanings of the symbols will be presented here as described by civilisations or according to what researchers have been able to deduce from their uses. In Ireland, Boyne Valley, in County Meath, there is an old building, known as Newgrange. This large funerary monument consists of several inner chambers. The outer walls of this Neolithic building were covered with quartz crystals that glittered in the sunlight. The monument was restored and is 76 metres across and 12 metres high; it was estimated that 200,000 tons of rock and other materials were used in its construction (Robinson, 2007, p. 1170). Although many of the myths associated with Newgrange are of Celtic origin, this monument preceded them by approximately 2,000 years, just as it preceded the Great Giza Pyramid by 500, and the circular stone construction of Stonehenge by almost 1,000 years.



Fig. 1: Spirals carved in stone (K1) in Newgrange, Ireland. 3,200~2,900 BC. Source: By John37309 - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=41007893>.

In the Newgrange funerary chambers, there are various stones with spiral carvings as well as circles, serpentine shapes and zigzags. At dawn in the winter solstice (December 21), sunlight penetrates one of the chambers located in the entranceway, illuminating three intertwined carved spirals, the Stone Goddess, important not only in Newgrange but also for the whole Celtic culture that came later (Robinson, 2007, p. 1172). The fact that the winter solstice marks the birth of a new year possibly indicates that the monument was erected pursuing the ideas of fertility, death, and rebirth. The architectural layout and the choice of spirals, among other entropic geometric images, carved in the stone, seems to have been used to replicate the mental conditions experienced in non-ordinary states of consciousness, specific ideas linked to the conception of a spiritual world.

The entrance stone, described as one of the examples of megalithic art in Western Europe, is also carved with complex patterns, spirals, concentric arches, and diamond shapes (Ward, 2006, p. 35).

It is necessary to cross this spiral barrier to reach the inner sanctum, a kind of passport required to enter a sacred kingdom. This realm of immortality is reached by a real or symbolic death, through rituals and initiations. This theme is found during the megalithic and Neolithic period in Europe, Mexico, China, and Egypt. For Purce, such spirals demonstrate the evolutionary nature of the journey made (Purce, 2003, p. 87).

In Brazil, in the Amazon region, there are several archaeological sites with numerous examples of rock art, and there have been reports on these sites since the colonisation period. The first information about the existence of rock art in the Amazon is found in the chronicles of European travellers and clergymen who travelled through the region during the first centuries of conquest and colonisation of Brazilian lands (Pereira, 2003, p. 17).

Particularly in the state of Pará, there are currently 111 sites with rock art. There are many paintings, petroglyphs and stone carvings in these places, where simplified figures of humans and animals are represented, faces and geometric designs that follow the same patterns found in other archaeological sites around the world, such as zigzags, gratings, and spirals, among others.

The Stone of the Apes is located near Km 96 of the Transamazonian highway (direction Altamira-Marabá). The stone, though less "sophisticated" than that of Newgrange, bears some resemblance to it, namely the curved and square spirals.

Notwithstanding, among European vestiges, the Celtic people represented spirals most vehemently. Celtic is the designation given to a group of various tribes that spread throughout much of North-western Europe around the year 2000 BC. Their artisanal production, such as weapons, household goods, jewellery, was crafted mainly in metals like brass with sophisticated skill in the techniques of the notch. The motifs were geometric designs, spirals, and stylised animal shapes.

In Druidism – the Celts' natural form of religion – the cycle of human life, being born, ageing and dying, was represented by a circle or a spiral. Druidism sought after balance by linking personal life to the spiritual source present in nature and thus recognised eight periods throughout the year, four of which were solar (male) and four lunar (female), marked by special religious ceremonies. The Celts did not pursue knowledge in an objective or rational way as modern civilisations do. The ultimate goal was not to tame the natural forces of Creation, to put a halter on Earth; but instead, to fully penetrate the mystery of human destiny and allow it to become intoxicated by it (Launay, 1980, p. 10).

Probably the earliest known example of the use of spirals is found in Mal'ta, on Lake Baikal, Siberia. There, a palaeolithic plaque made of mammoth

ivory dating back to 16,000 BC was discovered. The carvings are a series of double spirals, possibly serpents, around a simple seven-turn spiral that disappears through a hole in the centre of the plate (Robinson, 2007, p. 1200). According to Ward (2006, p. 12), this plate could date to 23,000 BC and may be associated with the lost civilisation of Shambhala, the legendary country of hyperboreans. The spiral with seven turns is also found among the Hopi Indians, symbolising Mother Earth.

A set of intertwined paths forms the labyrinth as an image coming from the spiral, often built around a cross, spiralling down to the centre. Appearing throughout history and in places all over the world, mazes symbolise the difficulty of reaching the centre, always protected. Christianity adopted this symbol to represent the difficulty of reaching Heaven, where the centre of the labyrinth is "Heavenly Jerusalem" (Ward, 2006, p. 10). In the centre of the labyrinth, artists often leave an invisible cell, shrouded in mystery, thus leaving one to one's intuition or personal affinities (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1982, p. 531). Although they have intricate shapes, the labyrinths are spirals and are associated with the cosmos:

[...] the world, the individual life, the temple, the town, man, the womb – or intestines – of the Mother (earth), the evolutions of the brain, the consciousness, the heart, the pilgrimage, the journey, and the Way. (Purce, 2003, p. 29)

According to Cirlot (1984, p. 329), "the maze had a certain fascination comparable with the abyss, the whirlpool and other phenomena" (1971, p. 173). Some cathedrals have a labyrinthine drawing on the ground, and the journey through them symbolised the pilgrimage to the Holy Land, also representing the signature of the initiatory confraternities of the builders of these cathedrals (Chevalier & Gheerbrant, 1982, p. 530).

Some labyrinths shaped like a cross, known in Italy as 'Solomon's knot', and featured in Celtic, Germanic and Romanesque decoration, are a synthesis of the dual symbolism of the cross and the labyrinth; they are known, for this reason, as the 'emblem of divine inscrutability'. (Cirlot, 1971, p. 175)

The famous coin of Knossos, of 3,000 BC, represents the labyrinth where the Minotaur lived. According to the Greek legend, it was also known as a Minoan spiral, but a similar image, or its mirror image, can be found in an Etruscan vase from the 7th century BC, as well as on a pillar in Pompeii and on the rocks of Rocky Valley, Tintagel in Cornwall, England. Much like the coin of Knossos, the American Hopi Indians use it as a symbol of Mother Earth, Tapu'at (mother and son), or as a symbol of birth and rebirth. These labyrinthine forms are carved into the rocks of the oldest dwellings in North America, in the villages of Oraibi and

Shipaluovi, as well as in the ruins of Casa Grande in Arizona (Doczi, 2006, p. 25). Since it is not a simple spiral form, but rather a very complex drawing, it refers to the universality of certain symbols, including the meanings that these cultures assigned to the labyrinth, connected to the mother symbol and the cycles of life.

On another symbolic aspect of labyrinths, Campbell states that:

We have not even to risk the adventure alone, for the heroes of all time have gone before us. The labyrinth is thoroughly known. We have only to follow the thread of the hero path, and where we had thought to find an abomination, we shall find a god. And where we had thought to slay another, we shall slay ourselves. Where we had thought to travel outwards, we will come to the center of our own existence. And where we had thought to be alone, we shall be with all the world. (Campbell, 2011, chapter V, paragraph 1; 2004, p. 23).

3. Anthropological References

Native societies considered primitive, coexist with a fundamental figure: the shaman or *pajé*. Shamanic practices are associated with non-ordinary states of consciousness and are quite ancient and similar all over the planet, which led Harner to create the term Shamanic State of Consciousness (Harner, 1982, p. 59).

According to Campbell

The shaman is the person, male or female, who in his late childhood or early youth has an overwhelming psychological experience that turns him totally inward. It's a kind of schizophrenic crack-up. The whole unconscious opens up, and the shaman falls into it. This shaman experience has been described many, many times. It occurs all the way from Siberia right through the Americas down to Tierra del Fuego. (Campbell, 2011, Chapter III)

Shamans are the best-prepared individuals in the tribe; they undergo difficult trials of initiation, and are usually the guardians of the stories and traditions of their peoples, taking on diverse roles, including that of doctors, musicians, artists, counsellors, priests, etc. (Eliade, 2002, p. 44). Shamans, as mediators between the material and spiritual world, in their states of trance describe visions of spirals.

The Maori tribes of New Zealand, Polynesia, are another excellent example of the importance of the representations of spirals. They tattoo spiral shapes on their faces. For them, the spirals represent the key to immortality. According to Polynesian tradition, after death, the soul encounters a terrible witch that will devour the spiral tattoos. In exchange, she will touch the eyes of the soul, granting it the vision of the spirits. If the witch does not find the tattoos, she will eat the eyes of the soul, preventing it from achieving immortality (Purce, 2003, p. 79). In addition, the spirals are a symbol of one's connection to the universe. Maori

also carve the spirals in wood and stone, hoping that the power attributed to these symbols will protect them from premature death (Doczi, 2006, p. 25).

The Shipibo-Conibo are tribes located in the eastern part of Peru, along the Ucayali River region, known for their tapestries and ceramics decorated with intricate geometric patterns inspired by ayahuasca experiences. A typical experience described by Shipibo-Conibo shamans is travelling in a supernatural canoe crewed by demons in order to recapture the stolen soul of a sick patient trapped in another canoe of demons by an enemy shaman. A non-shaman, under the influence of ayahuasca, may likewise have his soul taken away by a canoe crewed by these demons (Harner 1973, p. 158), whose crew is led by a yellow jaguar and a black puma (Harner 1973, p. 164). Under the influence of the drink, the Shipibo-Conibo generally see giant anacondas, venomous snakes and jaguars and, less frequently, other animals. The novice shaman, under the influence of ayahuasca, believes that he gets hold of giant serpents that become his personal demons to be used in his defence in supernatural battles against other shamans (Harner, 1973, p. 164).

The Shipibo have an almost unique style of art. Inspiration comes from mirages produced by ayahuasca, but it is a good example of how culture ends up by influencing the whole production of a group, handing down the same style to the next generations. The drawings are used in ceramics, embroidery, body paintings, rugs, paintings and are also associated with icaro or sacred and healing songs. Both the drawings and icaros are received by the shaman in an ayahuasca trance and may be intimately connected in a synesthetic way, that is, the drawings can be sung not only as if they were scores, but as sounds. These drawings sometimes resemble Eastern mandalas, sacred circles with labyrinths, dots and patterns that refer to entropic visions.



Fig. 2. Shipibo-Conibo jar. Shipibo women use an original pattern of geometric lines to decorate their textiles, cloth, body, and ceramics. Source:

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Shipibo_jar_\(UBC-2010\)a.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Shipibo_jar_(UBC-2010)a.jpg).

Many geometric patterns, although they generally combine straight lines and curves, form spiral figures.

4. Spirals in Contemporary Art

In the 1950s and 1960s, there was a boom in the use of psychedelic or hallucinogenic substances, notably LSD and hashish, where many forms of artistic expression were inspired by famous trips with these psychoactive substances, creating a particular aesthetic style, at the time associated with beatnik and hippie movements: Psychedelic Art. Psychedelic experiences were full of hallucinations per se, the contents of which were not taken very seriously.

Tom Wolfe reported cases like that of North-American writer Ken Kesey in the book *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*, 1993. Kesey led a group of not very ordinary people, owing to their extravagant habits and for having decided to spread the use of LSD, which was little known at the time, in order to propagate their supposed advantages to mental life. They opened doors in their minds, doors that they did not even suspect existed, a very wonderful thing. (Wolfe, 1993, p. 36)

Kesey, his band The Merry Pranksters, and friends took off on an old renovated school bus, painted in the best psychedelic style, with last-generation sound equipment and a 16mm camcorder, to carry out this "evangelising" mission on a trip to the New York World's Fair. Psychedelics were very profuse in the visual arts, and influenced many artists from that period, like Wes Wilson, Victor Moscoso, Rick Griffin, Ed Thrasher, Mati Klarwein, and Robert Williams, whose work inspired the concept of lowbrow or pop surrealism.

Recently the painter and writer Laurence Caruana (2006), director of the Viennese Academy of Visionary Art, reported that in 2005 he had to paint a canvas with the theme "Europe" for an exhibition near Munich, called Dalis Erben Malen Europe. The more he read about the myth of the abduction of Europe, the more intrigued he was about the occult and obscure aspects of the myth. According to the traditional Hellenistic myth, Zeus had turned into a fabulous white bull to seduce Europe, who after climbing on its back, was kidnapped. Zeus runs away with her over the sea to the island of Crete. Upon reaching the island, under a willow tree, Zeus comes out of his bull disguise and forces himself on the nymph. Caruana (2006) decides that the picture should then be called the violation of Europe and not the kidnapping. Among the sons of Zeus and

Europe is Minos, who reigned over Crete thanks to Poseidon, who had made a beautiful bull out of the sea, indisputable proof of divine favour. Minos should have sacrificed the animal to Poseidon, but did not. The god takes revenge, driving the bull mad and making Minos' wife, Pasiphae, fall in love with the animal. Pasiphae was able to join the bull. Sometime later, the Minotaur is born. Minos, terrified and ashamed, had an intricate labyrinth built, from which no one could get out, and trapped the Minotaur inside it. Traditional images created by artists such as Titian, Rembrandt and Moreau portrayed the abduction of Europe, with the maiden sitting on the bull running through the water. In the Caruana painting, several ancient images were researched and included in the work. Behind the representation of the Cretan goddess, holding two axes is the famous image of the labyrinth.



Fig. 3: Remedios Varo. *Spiral Transit*. 1962. Oil on Masonite. Source: <https://remedios-varo.com/obras-remedios-varo/decada-1960/transito-en-espiral-1962/>

Remedios Varo (1908-1963) was a Spanish surrealist painter who lived in Mexico. In her creative process, she was inspired mainly by esotericism and by the teachings of Gurdjieff, the famous Russian mystic and thinker. Her paintings contain alchemic imagery of deep symbolism. Varo painted spirals in several of her works. Figure 03, *Spiral Transit*, shows a journey made on small boats that follow a spiral watercourse. This journey from the periphery to the centre also refers to the idea of the labyrinth as in the *Labyrinth*, by the Fantastic Realist, Rudolf Hausner, and also in Varo's *Insomnia*, and Dorothea Tanning's *Birthday*. These last two depicting corridors with various doors that can lead to multiple compartments, as it happens in a path inside any labyrinth portrayed.

The painter Pablo Amaringo (1943-2009), who has become an icon of Visionary Art, comes from Puerto Libertad, a small settlement near the city of Tamanco, Peru. Before painting his visions, Amaringo painted naïve scenes of everyday life,

landscapes, female figures, and was a shaman, a vegetarian. It was not until later, under the influence of the anthropologist Luis Eduardo Luna, who suggested that he pictorially expressed his experiences with ayahuasca, that he began a great series of visionary works that resulted in the publication of *Ayahuasca Visions: The Religious Iconography of a Peruvian Shaman* (1999), which made him famous worldwide and his images widely used in books and graphic materials that deal with the subject. Amaringo even created a visionary art school in Pucallpa, called Usko Ayar. Amaringo says that he began to paint under the influence of ayahuasca. In visions, he learned how to mix colours correctly to create the most delicate nuances (Luna & Amaringo, 1999, p. 17). The paintings, in general, contain multi-coloured and luminous dots, which stand out even more because of the dark background. This visual effect is typical of miracles produced by ayahuasca. Amaringo comments that the themes painted by him are products of his visions, his experiences alone, and not ideas copied from any book.

The presence of spirals in the visions does not mean that artists necessarily portray them in pure form, as it is often the case in indigenous and prehistoric works. Most depict more complex, mixed figurative scenes among geometric and abstract elements that may or may not contain the spirals. Even if they see these geometric elements, artists will not always use them, in an attempt to avoid repetitions and stereotypes.

John Robinson, an Australian sculptor, created a series of pieces inspired by mathematical, physical, and symbolic motifs. It is an interesting example of a somewhat similar quest for the symbolism of the visionaries. Many places, such as Ireland, Italy, Greece, and Egypt were visited by Robinson, who, in Brazil, visited the city of Florianópolis, where he went to see the archaeological sites of Campeche.

In Eastern culture, Robinson (2007) indicates that the presence of the divine is centred on the harmony of all nature, as expressed by Tai Chi. In Western culture, because our religions teach us that God created man in his own image, the mystery of the divine, by tradition, is represented as a human figure. Robinson's works of the Universe Series attempt to depict works within a kind of symbolism where shapes found in nature are related to the values of life found in Western and Eastern minds. In creating the Universe Series, Robinson followed a path, from the beginning of time to the present day. The entire collection symbolically portrays the earth, animals, man and woman, birth, religion, civilisation, and death.

Another artist illustrating this section is Henson, who grew up in the teeming 1960s and was fortunate enough to see Ashbury Haight, San Francisco's borough and centre of the hippie

movement in full bloom. His early experiences were with Cannabis, and later he discovered LSD with a friend. After some recreational experiences, where he also consumed mushrooms, Henson says he was taught by LSD to use it as a form of learning. From there, the experiences served as the deepest inspiration for his paintings:

So it can be said that my art and my person have evolved simultaneously. It would be impossible to separate the experience of art, because they grew up together. (Personal communication by email of December 15, 2008).

Henson's works touch on the mysteries found in nature, the miracle of creation, sexual love, religions, mysticism, and the evolution of consciousness. In the painting *Wonders of Nature*, a person, in a moment of pure contemplation, admires a flower, resembling a lotus flower. The picture represents a particular moment in this contemplation, as if the whole universe participated in this pleasure, in total complicity pertinent to a daily miracle. In the *Double Helix* painting, a couple embraces, in a moment of love, between rays of energy that surrounds them in spirals, as in the Caduceus of Mercury or as in the DNA molecule, giving an idea of the necessary union of opposites in creative processes. These rays start from the centre of a galaxy in the universe and rise in space among many living beings, animals and plants, until they reach the couple, and move ahead among clouds and, at the bottom of them, an illuminated opening.

American artist Robert Smithson created a monumental spiral work known as Spiral Jetty. Smithson was a visionary artist, the pioneer of land art. Smithson is internationally renowned for his art and critical writings, which challenged traditional notions of contemporary art between 1964 and 1973. This monumental earthwork was inspired in part when Smithson saw the Great Serpent Mound, the Pre-Columbian Indian monument in South-western Ohio (Holt-Smithson Foundation).



Fig. 4: Spiral Jetty by Robert Smithson. Rozel Point, Great Salt Lake, Utah. April 1970 (mud, precipitated salt crystals, rocks, water). Coil 1500' long and 15' wide. <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/84/Spiral-jetty-from-rozel-point.png>.

With these few examples, we tried to show the

timeless interest in recurring images found in nature and their influence on the human imagination. The spirals and their derivations are ever-present, from rock art to the present day, and with quite similar symbols, either as a creative and energetic shape or as portals to the unconscious world. The creative ability associated with fantasy and the spirit of the time (*zeitgeist*) will renew the aesthetics of the works accomplished by artists.

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